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PLATO'S PROTAGORAS: MYTH AND DEMOCRACY ON TRIAL

David Johnson

The *Protagoras*, solely as a philosophical work, has importance. As a literary work, the dialogue becomes interesting when an attentive analysis of its structure is undertaken, namely the setting, cultural allusions, speech content, and participatory debate. These elements combine to expose ambiguous cultural and social conflicts, enabling the reader to more thoroughly understand Plato's intentions for the dialogue.

The narrative frame of *The Protagoras* consists of four main parts: the introduction, the exchange of long speeches, a time for deliberation among those present, and the final philosophical debate. Socrates serves as the narrator, and recollects the event to an unnamed friend. The issue of narration is important. The dialogue begins in the present-tense, and then transfers to the past-tense as Socrates tells his story. Socrates is the only witness present, and all the information is based on his own recollection. However, later in the dialogue, Socrates claims to be forgetful. The conflict of a forgetful Socrates as he recollects the event in great detail creates the need to be suspicious of his credibility.

The dialogue opens with a conversation between Socrates and his unnamed friend. The unnamed friend mentions his concern regarding

Socrates' pursuit of the beard-growing Alcibiades. Socrates uses Homer in his defense, saying Alcibiades is at what Homer called "the most charming age." The Homeric epics, which had served as models of correct behavior, had been transformed for current needs, signifying the tension between old and new values.

When Socrates begins his account of the previous night's dialogue, he no longer has any thoughts about Alcibiades' physical beauty. The easily distracted Socrates signifies another conflict: intellectual beauty versus physical beauty. Socrates' greater attention towards the intellectual signifies Plato's opinion.

Callias' home serves as the setting of the dialogue. Callias, a wealthy patron of the Sophists, had connections with Athenian political figures, through his widowed mother's marriage to Pericles. Callias' home is the setting and dates the dialogue. It takes place in democratic Athens prior to the seizure of power during the Tyranny of the Thirty.

The description of the setting provides a cultural allusion to a jury trial. In this setting, Hippocrates serves two functions. First, Hippocrates acts as a plaintiff in a trial, as he indirectly raises issues of money for wisdom, and the true educational method regarding virtue. Secondly, he has a symbolic equivalency to the reader. Hippocrates, with his unqualified enthusiasm and admiration towards Protagoras, needs some education. The reader, not necessarily aware of Protagoras' reputation, also needs some education.

In the allusion to the jury trial, Protagoras and Socrates act as opposing attorneys, and the others depict the jury. Prodicus, still wrapped in his bedrobes, represents the judge. The elder Protagoras is described as the semidivine poet Orpheus, and as a result, assumes the role of priest. The orderly, nondisrupting procession behind Protagoras adds to the religious symbolism, as disciples of the priest follow him obediently. Plato's use of religious symbolism portrays

Protagoras as the representative of tradition.

Socrates' Homeric references serve as further cultural allusions. He begins his description of the scene at Callias' home with the reference: "After that I recognized . . . " (315 C, *The Odyssey* 11:6101). In the next paragraph he again quotes Homer: "And there too I spied Tantalus . . . " (315 D, *The Odyssey* 11:582). Both references are from Odysseus' descent into Hades. Callias' home, and thus the "courtroom," are symbolized as Hades-like. Furthermore, the allusion to Hades mirrors Socrates' future death after his trial. The specific reference to Tantalus could symbolize the Sophists and their students. As they reach out for true knowledge, it constantly eludes them. Earlier, Socrates referred to knowledge as only being consumable as a whole and not purchasable at any price (314 B). Protagoras' followers continue to pay him fees, hoping to buy the elusive knowledge. Yet, true knowledge continues to be withheld from them, for they seek it in the wrong way. Money for wisdom was the main issue in the educational conflict. How could one be educated in the "true" knowledge? The philosophers and the Sophists each had differing methods. Plato, with his Homeric references implied the philosophic method as correct.

Along with Plato's allusion to the jury trial, his use of mythopoesis adds to the significance of culture in *The Protagoras*. Protagoras, as already demonstrated by his priestly role, carries out his traditionalist characterization as he acts as the myth teller. Protagoras, in reality, was a skeptic of myth and the gods. Yet, Plato's Protagoras tells the myth of Epimetheus and Prometheus. This myth also mirrors the story of Socrates and Alcibiades. Epimetheus' blundered distribution of necessary traits to man required Prometheus to save man from other physically-superior species. Prometheus' theft of fire from the gods earned him a tragic fate. Substituting Alcibiades for Epimetheus and Socrates for Prometheus, and placing the event at Athens, Plato has now used Protagoras to

tell the tragedy of Socrates. Socrates, the true philosopher, and the "saviour" to man, is forced to stand trial for Alcibiades' mistakes. As with Prometheus, Socrates' fate is tragic. In ascribing Socrates' story in mythic terms, Plato has ascribed Socrates epic hero and martyr status for posterity.

Protagoras continues with his story, telling how Zeus sent Hermes to instill justice and respect in all humans in order to save the species. Plato's Protagoras is using myth to justify democracy. The contrast of the real Protagoras versus Plato's version creates a conflict meant to expose Plato's true intentions. A staunch opponent of democracy, and a firm believer in the power of the aristocracy, Plato made it clear that democracy had no place in a "rational" Athens.

Plato formulates the speeches of *The Protagoras* to further comment on Sophism and Athenian democracy as they conflict with traditional norms and Plato's own values. Socrates gives his first major oration to Hippocrates. He raises the issues of what a Sophist represents, what they profess to do, and most importantly, their taking of money for their efforts. The idea of money for wisdom particularly infuriates Socrates. Hippocrates is more than willing not only to spend all his money, but to borrow from others to obtain what the Sophists teach. Yet, Hippocrates is not even clear initially on what the Sophists do teach. Socrates warns that the purchase of knowledge is much different than the purchase of other goods and services. Socrates likens the Sophists to merchants and peddlers (313 C). The image of a Sophist as a peddler raises doubts about their credibility and the need for such "goods." Neither profession is aristocratic or philosophic. Evidently, Plato was intent on eliminating any connection between the Sophists and the "true" Athenian aristocracy.

Protagoras' initial speech adds to Plato's characterization of him as the attorney for the traditional outlook. Protagoras describes Sophism as an ancient art, practiced by many, including Homer and Hesiod. Yet they hid their Sophism,

using their chosen professions as protection from charges of malice. With such references to ancient figures, Plato's Protagoras contradicts the real Protagoras, a man who sensed a need for new ideas.

A notable statement is also included in Protagoras' first speech. He says these hidden Sophists maintained their secrecy because "... the mass of the people notice nothing, and simply echo what the leaders tell them" (317 B). Plato skillfully slips in a slam on democracy. According to Plato, the common people, the indirect rulers of a democracy, are ignorant and unable to truly lead themselves. Plato not only trashes democracy, but converts the radical Protagoras to his conservative views.

Later, Socrates alludes to Protagoras' theory of closet Sophism by referring to Sparta's hidden intellectual and philosophical superiority. Socrates said they too kept their Sophism to themselves, fearing if others obtained it, they would lose their superiority. Plato forms an interesting irony. The Spartans were the quintessential military state with no interest in philosophy. In connecting the Spartans to Sophism, Plato implies Sophism has no relevance in a wise Athens. Since Sparta defeated Athens, perhaps Plato felt Athens' taste for Sophism and other corrupting influences led to its defeat.

Socrates' comments on Athenian political policy reflect Plato's unfavorable opinion of democracy. Socrates says that, regarding technical matters, the state listens to experts, but on political matters, the state will listen to anybody. Socrates believes this is so because virtue and politics are unteachable, unlike technical matters. Socrates obviously believes virtue is teachable. His real complaint then must be the opportunity of all citizens to have a say in political policy. Coupled with the earlier attack on the judgment of common people by Protagoras, Plato is implying democracy is a weak, destabilizing form of government. At the time this dialogue was written, Athens was in decline, and Plato must have

thought Athenian democracy played a major role in this decline.

In a change of pace and tone, Protagoras gives a long, rational speech echoing the values of Plato and Socrates. Through long-term schooling, physical activity, and imitation of past heroes, virtue is taught slowly and ingrained into one's mind and behavior. Not everyone can become a master of virtue, but everyone so taught will have recognition of what is virtuous, and will seek to obtain it. Protagoras even says the wealthy are the most able to be taught. Protagoras appears to be saying Sophists are not needed, nor are their fees. Virtue is taught over time, by education and imitation, not in brief sessions requiring fees. Protagoras mentions the example of language: how there are no teachers of it, for it is learned over time. Protagoras, in his own words, has made himself a living contradiction for the need of teachers of virtue.

Plato does not stop at ridiculing the Sophists teaching skills, but ridicules poetry as well. After his explication of Simonides' poem, Socrates comments on the necessity of poetry. Socrates says poetry reminds him of lower-class wine parties. These lower-classes find it necessary to use others' words and resources instead of their own. He complains of the ambiguities of poets and calls for people to discuss their own ideas. This is a direct attack on Protagoras, who had called poetry the most important of studies. It is also another attack on the need of commoners to have others' ideas in place of their own and equates Protagoras with them. It is another attack on democracy.

As a supplement to the major speeches, Plato uses the debate among the others present not only as a transition, and an opportunity for characterization, but also as a symbolic jury deliberation. Socrates pleads for Protagoras to lower his standards, for he is forgetful, and must have brief answers. Callias replies that both are entitled to feel they are right. Callias' comment demonstrates the indecisiveness of the jury,

and raises doubts about the credibility of their final verdict. It also foreshadows Socrates' fate and the credibility of his own guilty verdict.

Plato continues the characterization as he crafts the description of Prodicus. Socrates calls Prodicus an "inspired genius" and describes his "deep voice" as so loud it "drowns the words" (316 A). The voice, and the image it conveys, overtakes any relevant meaning. Prodicus says that the wiser should receive greater attention, but he never reveals the process for determining the wisest. Later, Socrates uses Prodicus for word clarification, calling his wisdom "old, and god-given" (341 A). Yet, Prodicus appears pedantic and overblown. The harsh description of Prodicus implies his ability as a judge should be questioned, as should the legality of Socrates' future conviction.

Plato wished to alter Socrates' reputation in posterity. In order to do so, he crafted the philosophic dialogue to symbolize a Homeric conquest. Socrates begins the final discussion with a reference from *The Iliad*: "If two go together, one perceives before the other" (10:224). In the poem, Diomedes and Odysseus are about to embark on an intelligence gathering mission which requires the wits of two men, enabling one to look ahead and see the best path. Socrates and Protagoras are also on a mission, to determine the true state of Virtue. Socrates will symbolize god-like Odysseus, as he looks ahead and determines the true state of Virtue. In equivocating Socrates with Odysseus, Plato makes Socrates an epic hero.

Late in the dialogue, Socrates uses "Protagoras and I," signifying their agreement. Protagoras' comments are reduced to simple, short affirmations of Socrates' often verbose questions and statements. In stating "Protagoras and I," Plato is demonstrating Socrates' victory over Protagoras. The philosopher is superior to the Sophist.

After his argument is refuted, Protagoras is initially bitter,

but undergoes a convenient transformation. He is praiseful of Socrates' mind and expository skill, telling of his professed admiration for Socrates and his feeling that Socrates will be remembered as a great philosopher. Socrates has now conquered the great mind of Protagoras, much like Achilles defeated Hector. Socrates' remembrance in posterity is complete, and he can die his fated death.

The Protagoras is a complicated work. It is ambiguous with disguised and contradictory meanings. However, some elements of *The Protagoras* are clear. Plato did not believe democracy or Sophism to have been legitimate. Plato also wished to elevate Socrates to the level of a new epic hero, and the structure of *The Protagoras* enables him to fulfill this goal.

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